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The Divine Maternity in Scripture and Dogma

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Allow me to treat the assigned topic, "The Divine Maternity in Scripture and Dogma," in the order its title suggests, that is, beginning with Scripture. This is not the only possible approach and it calls for an explanation. To some, looking for the idea of Divine Maternity in the Bible, even if only in the New Testament, might seem audacious or misguided. The more obvious thing to do, in their view, would be to talk about the controversies and council that led to the canonization of the non-biblical title *Theotokos*. One could then identify which scriptural passage or passages Christian thinkers have used over the centuries to back up the idea of divine maternity. This would be the approach of the kind of positive theology that makes Scripture the servant of the definers.

If we take this approach, beginning with Scripture, how could we proceed? One might begin with the meaning of maternity in the Old Testament, looking up the word "mother" in standard dictionaries of the Old Testament and the like. Or, moving from the general to the particular, one might look for prophecies with direct reference to a mother and a child (e.g., Gen. 3:15 and Isa. 7:14). Either of these approaches makes sense if we want to learn about scriptural ideas of maternity, but divine maternity is something else altogether.

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I will take a different way, a deeper way, starting with the deep meaning of divine maternity, which is this: if God is born in history, in the created world, then God has become very close to us. To find the deep roots of divine maternity in the Old Testament, then, we need to look for Old Testament passages that speak of God's presence in the world, of God being present to men and women, of God-with-us.

The Old Testament speaks often and eloquently about this presence. It also makes clear that the real presence of the true God is not to be confused with the apparent presence of false gods. The twentieth-century Protestant movement known as neo-Orthodoxy did Christendom the service of recalling the biblical portrayal of God as the absolutely transcendent, totally free, sovereign God who is "wholly other." This view would explain, among other things, the ban against making graven images. And, to be sure, the history of Israel gives ample evidence of the need to combat a sliding back into idolatry. The whole story of the Exodus may be read as the narrative of a people escaping from idolatry. And, in fact, that is how the Christian Church did read that story very early on, and she continues to do so every year on Holy Saturday. But it is not a story only about getting away from something; it is also a story about finding and getting near to something—or rather Someone: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2).[1]

While God forbade his people to paint his picture, he also wanted them to know him and not forget him. To make this possible, he spoke his Name, and he made them a promise: *I will be with you* (Gen. 26:3; Exod. 3:12; Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:5). But even had he not made this promise, had he only

[1] "Pour le peuple juif, c'est à partir de la sortie d'Egypte—qui est vécue comme une libération qui se veut totale et définitive—que l'image de Dieu peut être scrutée . . ." (Avital Wohlmann, "Pourquoi le silence de l'Hebraïsme d'aujourd'hui au sujet de Marie de Nazareth? Une femme juive répond," in *Maria nell'Ebraismo e nell'Islam oggi. Atti del 6⁰ Simposio Internazionale Mariological [Roma, 7-8-9- ottobre 1986]*, ed. Elio Peretto [Rome: Edizioni Marianum, 1987], 25).

revealed his Name, that would have been enough to let them know that he was present:

> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"
> . . . God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.'" (Exod. 3:13, 15)

As Denis Farkasfalvy observes in a recent article on the Eucharistic presence, the Lord's very name expresses, not only transcendent otherworldly existence, but also historical this-worldly presence:

> Linguistic analysis of the name YHWH favors the view that the one God of the Israelites is first and foremost "the One who is present" (the One who acts or makes things come about)—i.e., the name's meaning refers to a dynamic and creative presence, not a merely transcendent and otherworldly one, but a presence in the world and in history, a presence that both causes and participates in history.[2]

Even in the Old Testament, then, the Lord is "the one who is present."

We can find two different kinds of "presence language." First, we find transient presence, as when it says that the Lord was present "in" something: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light" (Exod. 13:21a).

> [Texts like this] usually speak of a revelatory, salvific, or protective presence of God and, thus, they usually do not refer to a static presence but rather a transient and dynamic one. However, there emerges rather soon in the Old Testament another frequently used concept of divine presence which speaks of a permanent "dwelling" of God in the midst of his people.[3]

[2] Denis Farkasfalvy, "The Eucharistic Presence: A Study in Biblical Theology," *Communio* 32 (Winter 2005): 706.

[3] Farkasfalvy, "The Eucharistic Presence," 708.

This second kind of presence language (God dwelling in the midst of his people) is especially relevant to our theme. We find it in Old Testament descriptions of Sinai, the Ark of the Covenant, the Tent of Meeting, and the Jerusalem Temple. Aristide Serra sees the Old Testament theme of God dwelling in the midst of his people as "remote preparation" for the theme of the incarnate presence of God in Mary. In fact, we can find the same words used to signal the presence of God with his people in Old Testament texts and to signal the incarnate presence of God in Mary's womb: Cloud, Spirit, and Blessing.[4]

The cloud, along with the verb "to overshadow" (the Septuagint has *episkiazo*) is a sign of the Lord's *shekinah*, the presence of God among men (rendered in the New Testament by "glory" (*doxa*). "And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud overshadowed it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:35). In the account of Israel's journey through the desert in the Book of Numbers, the cloud rests over the tent of meeting when Israel is encamped, but accompanies the people on the march, as a sign that God keeps his promise to be with his people (cf. Num. 9:18-22, 10:33-36). But when Isaiah describes the same journey, it is not the cloud, but the "Spirit of the Lord" that leads God's people (cf. Isa. 63:14).

Blessing is connected to life, specifically the life of God. When God blesses someone or something, he makes it a participant in his life. Because God is the source of all life, God's blessing can bring about new life: "And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply . . ." (Gen. 1:22a). This blessing that gives life is connected to the "Spirit" or "breath" of God, as when God breathes into Adam, the clay-man, making him a living being. Conversely, "When you take away their breath, they perish and return to the dust from which they came. When you send forth your breath, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:29b-30).

[4] Here I summarize the findings of Aristide Serra, *Nato da donna (Gal 4,4): ricerche bibliche su Maria di Nazaret (1989-1992)* (Rome: Edizioni Marianum, 1992), 54 ff.

The place of God's ultimate blessing, the gift of life, is the womb. This appreciation of the womb as place of blessing leads us to a new appreciation of "the feminine" in the Old Testament. We can see a deep connection between the theme of God's presence and the role of women, or of a female figure such as "daughter Zion" or "daughter of Zion" or "Jerusalem the mother." Here we are beginning to move toward something approaching what Christians mean when they say "divine maternity."

In the Old Testament oracles addressed to "daughter Zion," a lasting dwelling of God among his people is promised."[5] For example, "Rejoice, exult, daughter of Zion, behold, I am coming to dwell among you" (Zech. 2:14) and "Fear not, Zion . . . the Lord your God is a mighty savior in your midst" (Zeph. 3:16-17).

There are three things to note about the presence of God in these passages. First, it is associated with a female figure. Second, it is relational: God is not merely "present" in the sense that he is present everywhere. He is present "among" someone, present "in their midst." Finally, God's presence has a powerful purpose: salvation. We will see these same three elements in the New Testament account of the announcement and presence of the Messiah.

In our reading of the New Testament, we wish to pay special attention to the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament language describing God's presence. This continuity should come as no surprise; indeed, early Christians would have been surprised to hear of discontinuity. Basil Studer tells why:

> According to the early Christian experience which is founded on the apostolic preaching to which the New Testament writings bear witness, Jesus Christ, the savior sent from God, is himself true God, although he is not identical with the Father, and as such is fully and completely present to his people only in the Holy Spirit. This faith in God, who through his Holy Spirit has glorified Christ as his Son and still glorifies him, is however always preached in the context of faith in the God of the patriarchs, i.e., in the faith in God's salvation which in the last days should

[5] Aristide Serra, *E c'era la Madre di Gesù . . . (Gv. 2,1): saggi di esegesi biblico-mariana (1978-1988)* (Milano: Edizioni Cens-Marianum, 1989), 56.

> find its fulfillment in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to neglect this connection with the faith of Israel, all the more so as the scriptures of the Old Testament . . . remained *the* Holy Scriptures until the middle of the second century.[6]

In the Old Testament we looked for and found a personal presence of God in the historical world; in other words, God-with-us. Now, in the Incarnation, we will find the highest instance of this personal presence. From now on, Jesus Christ, the ultimate Emmanuel, will take the place of the Temple as the place where God is present in the midst of his people. The language used in the Old Testament to speak of God dwelling in our midst will be retained in the New Testament, but applied to Christ, the eternal Son who "pitched his tent" among us (cf. John 1:14).

In the same way, the fundamental Christian creedal statement will be constructed purely of Old Testament language: Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. Phil. 2:11). The proclamation of the Lordship of Christ may also be seen in the story of the Visitation, where we find the first formulation of the divine maternity, when Elizabeth calls Mary "Mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Luke's account of the Annunciation and Visitation is replete with the kind of Old Testament presence-language we have just surveyed. The Angel's greeting, *Kaire* ("Rejoice!"), marks Mary as the daughter of Zion, in whose midst—physically!—the saving God is present. The Lord is with her—language indicating that she is being called to participate in the salvation of Israel. Again we see the three words that signaled God's *shekinah*: cloud, spirit, blessing.

Cloud. The cloud, or God's "spirit," was said to "rest" (*episkiazein*) over Sinai, the tent of meeting, and the Jerusalem Temple:

Sinai. Exod. 24:16 (glory, cloud);
Tent. Exod. 40:34-35 (cloud, glory, *epeskiazen*);
Temple. I Kings 8:10-12 (cloud, glory), parallel in 2 Chron. 5:13b.

[6] Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 5.

Spirit. In the same way, Mary is told that God's spirit would come upon her and the Power of the Most High overshadow (*episkiazein*) her. The overshadowing spirit-cloud, sign of God's presence, is found not only in Luke's account of the annunciation (cf. Luke 1:35) but in his account of the Transfiguration as well (cf. Luke 9:34). Mary, "overshadowed by the cloud of the Spirit, the Power of the Most High, is filled with the incarnate Presence of the Holy Son of God."[7]

Blessing. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizes that the Mother of her Lord has come to her, and speaks in the Old Testament terms of blessing. In the Old Testament, blessing is joined to the idea of life which originates in the spirit of God. These three elements are found in Mary to the highest possible degree. That is why she is called the most blessed of all women.

[She] is the *most blessed* among women, because the fruit germinated in her womb is not just any life, but the *Author of life himself* (cf. Acts 3:15), the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32, 25). And at the origin of this life is not the seed of Joseph, but only the *mighty energy of the Holy Spirit,* to whom nothing is impossible (Luke 1:35, 37, 49). In other words, Mary is the most blessed of all women because the fruit of her womb, brought to life by the Spirit of God, is a *divine Being*.[8]

This is clearly seen in the parallel between Uzziah's words to Judith and Gabriel's words to Mary:

JUDITH (Jud. 13:18)	MARY (Luke 1:42)
. . . you are blessed . . .	Blessed are you
above all women on earth;	among women
and blessed	and blessed
be the Lord God.	is the fruit of your womb.

[7] Serra, *E c'era la Madre di Gesù*, 56-58.

[8] Serra, *Maria secondo il Vangelo* (2nd ed.; Brescia: Queriniana, 1988) 28, emphasis in original.

There are other New Testament passages we need to cite. "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). Note well: God sent *his* Son—not anybody's son except his—implying unity of nature. The author of Galatians is building on the Old Testament understanding that Israel was God's son to help Christians understand the unique sonship of Christ, as well as their dignity as heirs of the promise. Because he had a mother, God's son is both human and related to Israel.[9] This linking of divine sonship and adoptive sonship establishes the link between Mary's motherhood of the Son of God and her spiritual motherhood of all believers (John 1:12-13 should be read along with this).

The early Christians' belief that Jesus was the only Son of God made possible their interpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. If you believe in an incarnate Son of God, you will not be able to speak about the Incarnate Lord without speaking about his mother. It becomes clear that God can be Emmanuel, God *with us*, because he has a mother. Based on this fundamental insight, the first Christians saw the birth of Christ from a Virgin as the definitive fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Let us now turn to the first four centuries of Christian dogmatic development.

From Soteriology to Christology, or, from *Oikonomia* to *Theologia*

Basil Studer, in his work *Trinity and Incarnation*, shows how early Christian theology first focused on the story of salvation, on God's saving *oikonomia*. Appreciation of what God did led to deeper consideration of who God is, to *theologia*. Emphasis on *oikonomia* led to Christological dogmas, while consideration of *theologia* led to a developed Trinitarian theology (of course, it is not possible to separate these two investigations entirely). We can see this progression if we look at what Christian thinkers said about the Mother of Jesus during the first four centuries, and how that discourse developed over time.

[9] Raymond E. Brown, et al., eds. *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 42.

The first Christian apologists and theologians firmly taught the divinity of Christ. But it is usually the case that when they speak of his mother, they do so to affirm his true humanity. Only God could save us, but only one of our race could offer salvation to the human race as a whole. The early Church had to emphasize this point for both evangelical reasons and out of concern for doctrinal purity.

A good early example of this is found in the Letter to the Ephesians of Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110):

There is one Physician who has

both flesh	and spirit
[who is] both made	and not made
God existing	in flesh
true life	in death;
both of God	and of Mary[10]
first passible	and then impassible

Jesus Christ our Lord (Eph. 7).

Notice that Mary is associated with flesh, creation, passibility, and mortality, which are the defining characteristics of Our Lord's human nature.

We now have to consider how Christian thinkers got from point "A" to point "B." At point "A," Mary's motherhood is preached in order to reinforce the point that Christ has a true humanity, while at point "B," one proves the correctness of one's Christological belief by proclaiming Mary as "Mother of God." If we do not take the time to see how and why this happened, we might easily succumb to the misbelief that the Church had to proclaim Mary Mother of God as part of its campaign to divinize a purely human Jesus of Nazareth. This is not a merely theoretical problem, as both popular literature (and films) and scholarly works will show.

The first Christian theological reflection on the Mother of God arose from a desire to illuminate the economy or plan of

[10] I have slightly altered the order of words in this passage to make the columnar arrangement possible.

salvation, just as the first proclamation of Christ was a Gospel of salvation, a proclamation that "God has established his [reign] in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."[11] The way that Christ was proclaimed had to change quickly, and this led to changes in the way Christians talked about Mary:

> In the apologetic and anti-gnostic confrontation with hellenism (150-200) Christian theologians and preachers reinterpreted the apostolic faith . . .
>
> More precisely, the deepened and developed proclamation of Christ of the first three centuries led to a thorough reflection on the relationship of Christ—now especially called Son and Logos—to the Father on the one hand and to the man Jesus on the other . . . The stronger emphasis on a christology of pre-existence which had become necessary for apologetic reasons and because of the need to defend the resurrection of the flesh (*salus carnis*) at the same time entailed that theologians had to pursue sooner or later the question of the *one* Christ, true God and true man.[12]

In the same way, reflection on Mary first discusses her role in salvation history before giving her a title, *Theotokos*, based on who her son is in relation to the eternal God. And note that this title also affirms "the *one* Christ, true God and true man."

Even now, centuries after the title "Mother of God" has been officially accepted by the Church, it remains true that this title refers ultimately to her role in salvation history. But perhaps this is not self-evident. One of our contemporaries, unschooled in Christian doctrine, coming across the title "Mother of God" for the first time, would naturally think of eternity, of God outside of time, and understand the Marian title as referring to some kind of divinity. This is no doubt one of the reasons why the title "Mother of God" is so often a stumbling-block to non-Catholic evangelical Christians. It is good, then, to recall the saying of St. John Damascene, that the name *Theotokos* contains the whole history of the divine economy of salvation (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book III, Chapter 12).

Another word on the usefulness of the title "Theotokos." While it took time for Chistology and Trinitarian theology to

[11] Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation*, 15, trans. altered.
[12] Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation*, 16.

arrive at a developed theological justification for the title, the recognition that correct thinking about Mary served to guarantee correct Christology had arrived much earlier. We have already seen this recognition in the passage from Ignatius of Antioch quoted above. When the Council of Ephesus solemnly proclaimed the title *Theotokos* in 431, it made this Mariological term a test of Christological correctness. In doing so, it was doing the same thing Christians had done from the beginning.

Recently we have all been made all too aware of the notion of the "Divine Feminine." Many of those intrigued by this idea see Mary's Divine Maternity as just another instance of "the goddess" in the history of religions. Before this way of thinking became widespread, it was already commonplace for students of comparative religion to draw parallels between pagan myths of a god fertilizing a human woman and the Christian belief that Mary was Mother of a Son who was more than merely human. That this was the case long before there was an academic discipline of comparative religion can be seen in Origen's *Contra Celsum*. There are and have been many different ways to say that the Divine Maternity is just another myth, and not a very original one at that.

However, once the origins of the title "Mother of God" have been fully understood, it becomes impossible to ascribe the content of the title to non-Christian influences. Far from being mythological in inspiration, the title is anti-mythological, for it is based on a concrete historical claim: that the immortal and eternal God chose precisely one moment in history, one concrete place, and one really existing woman, in which to assume a real human nature. He did this to become present to us in the fullest possible way, by offering to share his divine life with our life, to join himself to our collective and—at least potentially—individual history, so that it might come to a glorious fulfillment in everlasting life in a place beyond history. For there can be no history where the story never ends, and God's story is the story of love, and we have it on excellent authority that love never ends.